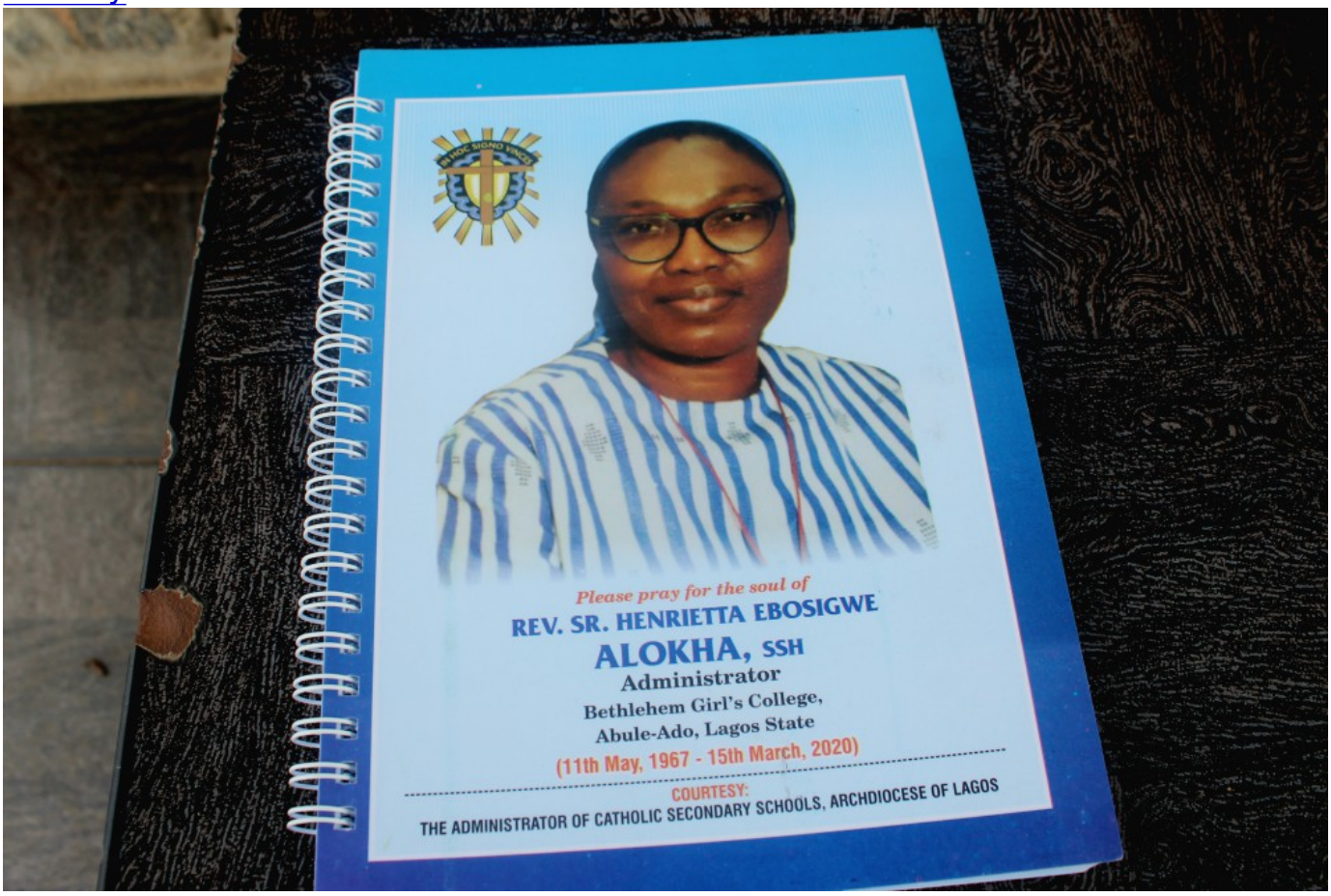
News
Ministry



A booklet made in honor of Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Henrietta Alokha, who died rescuing students of the Bethlehem Girls College after a massive March 15 gas explosion in a suburb of Lagos, Nigeria (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

by Kelechukwu Iruoma

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Lagos, Nigeria — July 2, 2020
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On March 15, Maryjane Okafor, a final-year student at Bethlehem Girls College — a secondary boarding school operated by the sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, had

just finished reading the responsorial psalm on behalf of the students at the refectory. She went back to her seat as the visiting priest took over the podium to read the Gospel.

As soon as he began the homily, Okafor noticed white smoke coming from the entrance of the refectory, accompanied by the smell of gas. The smoke soon became heavy. "Everywhere became cloudy and we could not see clearly," recalled Okafor. Then the lights went out.

Meanwhile, the school principal, Sr. Henrietta Alokha, sensed something was wrong and rushed outside to see where the fumes were coming from. She returned to the refectory, told the priest to stop the Mass and instructed all the students to exit quickly.

Alokha's quick action then and afterward led to the rescue of many of her students, but when the gas leak explosion and fires were done, 17 people would be dead, including Alokha, and 50 buildings and homes destroyed in the drowsy community of Abule Ado.



The classroom building of the Bethlehem Girls College was gutted after an explosion at a gas processing plant and ensuing fire killed at least 17 people and destroyed about 50 buildings and homes in a suburb of Lagos, Nigeria’s commercial capital. (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

"The nun sounded very distraught," said Okafor, breaking down in tears during an interview with Global Sisters Report. "As we moved out of the refectory and headed to the convent, that was when an explosion occurred."

Some students were still inside the refectory. Alokha went back and evacuated them. She kept searching to see if there were more trapped inside but she never made it out, as the building collapsed on her, killing her.

The explosion

The explosion was triggered by a gas leak after a truck hit some gas cylinders stacked in a gas processing plant located in front of the college, according to the

Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, which refines, transports and markets the country's oil.

The corporation's above-ground oil pipeline right-of-way is located near the gas processing plant.



Emeka Ogbu, the chief security officer of Bethlehem Girls College (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

The incident killed at least 17 people, including Alokha and seven staff of the college, and injured 25 others, according to the Lagos State Emergency Management Agency, which mitigates and coordinates disaster response in Lagos State. The school also lost all the students' and college documents, including students' examination certificates.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Sr. Chinenyenwa Ihekoronze, vice principal of the school, also helped evacuate students, said Alokha died in the school building collapse. "It was really a devastating experience," said Ihekoronze.

Emeka Ogbu, the chief security officer of the girls school, told GSR that bodies of other staff of the college and convent were found a few days after the explosion.

"I am a retired soldier, I never experienced that kind of explosion all through my years in service," he said.

A large heart and selfless love

None of the students of the college died in the explosion, thanks to Alokha, who ensured they were evacuated.

"I miss her a lot," said Okafor. "Most times when I see her pictures, I cry." She described Alokha as a "nice person and mentor whose full imprint can never be covered."

Born in Edo state in southern Nigeria on May 11, 1967, Alokha, whose middle name is Ebosiogwe (meaning "the will of God"), was received into the novitiate in April 1985 and made her profession of temporary vows at the Sacred Heart Novitiate Chapel, Atani-Uromi, Edo State.

Ogbu said Alokha was a woman who cared and that was why she went back to the building to check if there were still children trapped there. "If it were to be someone that did not care, she would have tried to rescue herself," he said.

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Sr. Monica Rowland, the superior general of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, said Alokha gave her sacrificial love to save the children, which she said is the charism of the sisters of the congregation.

She described Alokha as a "woman with a very large heart who loved children so much, especially in the area of education. She did it with passion. She was never tired. I saw it as her calling. She was a good shepherd, caring, and loving mother."

Air Force honors Alokha

When Nigerians heard of the sacrifice the sister made to save the students of the college from dying, they went to social media requesting that the government immortalize her.

The Nigeria Air Force on June 11 heeded the public's call to honor the late sister, noting that it was a way to remember her and also encourage soldiers to be courageous.

Lawal Alao, who is the air officer in charge of logistics command, unveiled a plaque in Alokha's honor and named the newly constructed 500-capacity assembly hall at the Air Force Secondary School after her.



The assembly hall at the Air Force Secondary School in Lagos was named after Sr. Henrietta Alokha of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on June 11. (Kelechukwu Iruoma)

"I am hopeful that naming the assembly hall after reverend Sr. Henrietta Alokha will not only be symbolic but will continually keep her memory fresh in our hearts. I am convinced that the stories of her heroic act that day will continue to remind our younger ones of the values of selfless service to humanity," Alao said, adding that her sacrifice should also motivate Air Force personnel in the line of duty.

Rowland said during the interview, "Alokha will be a role model for the students of that school and sisters will be encouraged to be courageous in doing noble things that will be of service to humanity and to the glory of God."

The students supported the honors bestowed on their principal.

"When I heard she was immortalized, I felt she deserved it," said Okafor. "The important thing is that she rests in peace."

[Kelechukwu Iruoma is a freelance journalist based in Nigeria.]